The Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies
STRATEGIC DATALINK
de L'Institut Canadien D'Études Stratégiques

LEADING FROM THE REAR: CANADIAN DEFENCE EFFORTS BEYOND KABUL

David Rudd
President & Executive Director, CISS
Strategic Datalink #124
November, 2004

Introduction

Since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 a coalition of nations has laboured with varying degrees of success to muster and channel the necessary human, material, and financial resources into the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Since 2002 the country has been the focus of an evolving approach to the restoration of peace and security in failed and failing states. The strategy calls for interaction between defence, diplomacy, and development. It is widely considered to be a promising template upon which future Canadian missions abroad will be built.

This paper will explore how the prudent use of allied and, more specifically, Canadian military resources can play a role in bringing lasting stability to Afghanistan – in particular the areas lying outside the national capital. It will briefly survey the strategic political landscape in Afghanistan, identify the principal threats to stability in that traumatized country, focus on the goals for which military resources may be applicable, and put forth a non-exhaustive list of military options from which the Government of Canada may choose should it wish to make a relevant and effective contribution to the broader international effort to bring order to the Afghan hinterland.

The defence effort mounted by Canada in Afghanistan will not be the single decisive factor in the long-term rehabilitation of that country. However, if properly resourced and committed with a sober appreciation of the risk/reward balance, it should assist in extending law and order to regions of Afghanistan which so manifestly need it.

In keeping with the goal of providing novel solutions to the government and the Canadian public, a broad range of options involving various forces configurations and tasks will be reviewed. This will go some way to precluding the imposition of unnecessary normative restrictions on what Canada's military role should be. It will also serve to remind the government that it cannot divorce the defence effort in Afghanistan from larger defence policy issues. The course(s) of action Ottawa ultimately chooses could have profound effects on Canada's defence and security policy and the long-term viability of the Canadian Forces (CF).

Situation

A peaceful, stable, and prosperous Afghanistan is of demonstrable strategic importance to Canada. The use of the country as a training base for Islamic radicals facilitated the attacks of 9/11 in which 24 Canadians were killed. The attacks also had a knock-on effect – most notably the temporary disruption of commerce across the Canada-US border. The opium trade, suppressed under the Taliban, has returned to its former prominence, fuelling criminal activity worldwide. In Afghanistan it supports the near-destitute while enriching the unscrupulous, to the detriment of central authority.[1]

A political order of sorts exists, albeit one that does not yet manifest true stability. The newly-elected government of President Hamid Karzai presides over a population which, although traumatized by war and famine, is resilient and hopeful, and harbours great expectations that life will improve with a judicious amount of outside help.

Three years after the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan's security and stability are threatened by at least four persistent factors:

1) Revanchist Taliban (TB) forces, and the remnants of Al Qaeda (AQ), continue to harass indigenous and coalition actors trying to foster stability and political participation in the rural areas. A low-level insurgency threatening aid workers, soldiers, and government officials should be expected for the foreseeable future. (External support for the insurgency by neighbouring countries and their intelligence services in the form of money and arms cannot be ruled out.[2])

2) Entrenched regional commanders (provincial warlords) continue to seek political power, money and immunity from central government control. With independent sources of revenue, a total private militia force estimated

at 100,000 and the tacit support of US military commanders whose primary concerns centre around counter-insurgency efforts in the rural areas[3], the regional leaders have achieved a level of power and (at least in their own eyes) legitimacy that the central government can only envy.

3) The opium trade has become the single most important source of economic activity. It supports all non-government factions, as well as large swaths of the civil population. For the provincial leaders, it provides a rich and reliable source of revenue, making them more difficult for the government to co-opt. Other forms of illicit economic activity (i.e. road tolls) further obstruct compliance with laws promulgated to assert central control.

4) The limited writ of the central government, and the immaturity of government institutions, inhibits the promotion and maintenance of law and order both within the capital and in the provinces. A dearth of trained civil servants to develop and carry out policy hampers the effectiveness of all government ministries. A legislature to give legitimate voice to regional/ethnic concerns will not come into existence until the spring of 2005.

Alongside residual dangers from mines and other unexploded ordnance, these threats have the capacity to make Afghanistan ungovernable. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), whose mandate is to provide support to fledgling indigenous security forces, is not large enough to exercise broad surveillance and control, or to undertake widespread security and reconstruction tasks, in the country's vast hinterlands.[4] At this time, the relative stability in Kabul and the surroundings areas is attributable more to the willingness of warlords to maintain an uneasy détente between themselves, rather than to the efforts of the coalition.

Law and Order

The interim goal of the allied coalition is to promote law and order outside of Kabul. In general terms this means that that the authority of the centre is not just tolerated by over-mighty subjects, but that it is broadly if not universally recognized. It involves the marginalization of rival centres of power and their replacement with institutions which serve the interests of all citizens. Law and order can be temporarily imposed, but must ultimately be self-sustaining, with enforcement actions undertaken by indigenous security forces as soon as they reach a certain level of maturity.

Efforts to spread the writ of the government to the provinces have been and will continue to be hampered by political incapacity and by geography. The embryonic Afghan National Army (ANA) and police forces are just beginning to deploy outside the capital. The training of the latter is a lengthy process made even more complicated by the fact that, for some trainees, allegiance to their tribe supersedes their loyalty to the central government.

The country's vast expanses dilutes the ISAF presence, opening up the field to mischief-makers intent on victimizing the civil population, or harassing those engaged in relief and stabilization efforts. Guerrilla activity such as kidnappings, hit-and-run attacks, and the planting of mines and other explosive devices along isolated stretches of roads and highways is an ongoing concern. Mountainous areas along the border with Pakistan provide shelter to insurgents and prevent proactive detection and neutralization of armed threats.

It is in the provinces that poppy cultivation takes place. A significant portion of the population derives sustenance from this activity, as the farming of other crops has been difficult due to adverse climatic conditions. There is precious little industry in the provinces, and few investors are likely to consider fostering alternate economic activities outside major cities.[5]

The power of regional leaders who hold sway over the drug trade will be extremely difficult to curb. Their co-operation in ruling governing Afghanistan has been purchased by high-ranking government jobs, but this has not caused them to suspend support for the drug trade, which, given the absence of alternative sources of revenue, is too lucrative.

There is no appetite inside or outside Afghanistan to suppress the warlords through military means. Even if the human and material resources did exist – and US, European, and Canadian militaries are too stretched at this time – it likely that taking down the regional leaders one by one would drive them together into an anti-government pact.

Mission

There is little doubt that the breadth and depth of the challenges facing Afghanistan will require bold action on the part of Canada and the wider international community. In simplest terms, the mission involves advancing the law and order agenda of the central government. How the Canadian military contributes to this imperative will require innovative thinking and careful planning, as well as improved tactics, strategies, organizational concepts, and partnerships. It will also involve a measure of risk-taking commensurate to the mission's importance to Canada. The latter is of great yet largely unrecognized importance to Canadians, who will underwrite these efforts. In recent years the public has not been well served by a lack of parliamentary attention to overseas operations, with the result that Canadian Forces have been inadequately equipped and/or supported. Where casualties have been sustained, the government has been slow to address public anxieties, or to rally public opinion around missions deemed essential to Canada's national security.

The political mission dictates that the military must keep the above-mentioned threats at bay until the central government is in a position to assume full responsibility for security and governance. To this end, Canadian and allied militaries, supporting a gradually expanding ANA and police presence, must establish zones of stability in the provinces which, over time, may be networked into larger areas of stability. Zones could be centred in or around provincial capitals to subtly demonstrate to provincial leaders and their retinues that the power of central government is not confined to Kabul.

Execution

What type of military presence is required and what capabilities could be brought to bear to thwart guerrilla activity, limit the power of provincial power-seekers, and promote the general welfare of the rural population?

It is unlikely that the size of ISAF will be increased beyond the 9,000 troops forecasted. This latter number must be maintained, since the greater density of forces on the ground cannot help but increase the capacity of the government to project its will. Both ISAF and the Canadian contingent will need to forge a closer working relationship with indigenous security forces. Doing so will increase the professionalism of latter, and promote civil awareness that Afghanistan's security ultimately rests with Afghans. It will also help to ensure a steady flow of vital information to ISAF on potentially nefarious activities within the zones. Reliance on regional commanders for intelligence on TB and AQ activity will have to be tolerated for the foreseeable future.

The mandate and configuration of Canada's military contribution to the stabilization effort can be selected from a non-exhaustive list of options. Each draws principally from the Canadian army, for the simple reason that the land force is most relevant to crisis resolution operations on land. Given current and projected human resources, the author considers each option to be 'doable' for an indefinite period, *provided Canada undertakes no other major open-ended military deployments.*

i) Combat/counter-insurgency operations:

A light infantry battalion (LIB) attached to the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) gave a good account of itself in 2002/3 despite significant logistical shortcomings in areas such as tactical lift. A similar contribution to OEF's efforts in mountainous areas could assist in keeping TB and AQ forces at bay, thereby creating conditions favourable to national reconstruction. It should be noted that the failure of OEF would almost certainly mean the failure of the stabilization effort throughout the country.
The use of Canadian special operations forces (i.e. Joint Task Force-2) could serve as an alternative to the LIB, thereby reducing the logistical burden while bringing to bear a highly-mobile surveillance and counter-insurgency capability. Such forces can be used in direct action operations, or to conduct long-range reconnaissance operations for friendly forces.

ii) Peace support operations:

The use of an LIB or mechanized battalion may be employed to create a stable zone within which relief agencies can operate in relative safety. Forces thus employed would have robust rules of engagement, but would not be pre-occupied with force protection, as has sadly been the case with the recent deployment of 2,000 Canadians in Kabul. In order to achieve information superiority and maintain public confidence, troops would have to conduct mounted *and* dismounted foot patrols and, whenever possible, eschew protective headwear and eyewear.
Alternatively, deploying *one or more* provincial reconstruction teams (PRT) to the provinces would serve a variety of complementary purposes. Mixing small infantry sub-units for local protection of engineers, logisticians, and medical personnel provide a range of skill-sets that can handle development/reconstruction work in areas prone to occasional instability. The PRT would take advantage of protective assets held at higher level (i.e. tactical air support) should the situation deteriorate.

iii) Defence diplomacy/security sector reform:

The deployment of instructor cadres to assist, respectively, US and German forces training ANA and police units would hasten the expansion and professionalization of the indigenous security capacity. Cadres of sufficient size should be established so that instructors could be detached to accompany Afghan forces on operations to monitor their progress as they expand the boundaries of safe areas.[6]
Cadres might also undertake training of local civilians for specific security tasks, such as the recognition and clearance of land mines and unexploded ordnance. Skills imparted to the indigenous population can be passed on within that population, so that expertise is maintained after CF personnel depart.

iv) Combination of i), ii), iii)

Concurrent operations within a province or in different provinces may be undertaken provided that specialized skill-sets are not in short supply. Given the apparent need for long-term engagement, variations in the size of the Canadian force in country may be necessary. Canada should consider this as a way of managing military human resource constraints.

Issues in Development

In recent years, international organizations and non-governmental organizations have expressed concern that some military forces have, unintentionally or not, traded their quasi-development activities for information on combattants. If development activities are suspect, not only will they be thwarted to the detriment of the vulnerable, development workers themselves may be targeted for retribution.

As it is imperative that defence and development efforts do not work at cross-purposes, the PRT concept must be studied carefully to ensure that it yields maximum long-term impact, while leaving immediate-impact projects to reputable aid organizations. Providing security in a given geographical space requires skills that no civilian organization possesses. Accordingly, the PRT(s) deployed by Canada should consider concentrating on providing security while carrying out development projects sparingly.

Leading From the Rear

Any active role for Canadian ground forces in clipping the wings of regional commanders and their militias is unlikely under any conceivable circumstances, as the former are too powerful to be brought to heel by military means. But participation in disarmament, demobilization, and re-integration (DDR) efforts should not be ruled out, if opportunities present themselves. It has been shown that guerrilla fighters are less likely to object to handing over weapons to uniformed troops.

Canadian and allied forces are deployed in support of indigenous security-enhancement efforts; it is up to Afghans to take the lead to the greatest degree practicable. Accordingly, allied forces should steer clear of overt participation in counter-narcotics operations, however worthwhile the effort. Premature forays into drug eradication – that is, before the militias

have been weaned off poppy-growing by alternate sources of income - would serve to minimize the goodwill between foreign forces and provincial heavyweights.

If stabilization and socio-economic development efforts proceed apace, reliance on the warlords to maintain stability in their respective provinces may be reduced over time. This could paradoxically create tensions between them and the central government, as they perceive themselves to be of less importance to the maintenance of law and order. Allied forces should therefore prepare for turbulence in their relationship with those whose cooperation they once sought. Expect regional power-brokers to exploit tribal or nationalist sentiment to justify political intransigence and obstructionism.

Defence Policy Considerations

Observers of Canadian defence planning will have noted that the high tempo of operations since the early 1990s has resulted in a gradual 'hollowing out' of the regular and reserve armies to the point where deployments now involve smaller numbers of troops. As the Canadian army is, in the words of its former commander, LGen Mike Jeffrey, too small for the tasks at hand and too big for its budget[7], Canada must align its resources with its strategic interests. It must put an end to the laudable yet unsustainable tendency to contribute to any and all multi-national missions, regardless of location, duration, or relevance to Canada's national security.

A meaningful Canadian presence in Afghanistan will almost definitely require enhancements to the pool of trained regular and reserve ground forces. The government's promise to add up to 5,000 personnel to the regular CF and 3,000 to the reserves is welcome, although no timetable has been set for the fulfilment of this pledge. As Afghanistan is a land-locked country with inaccessible hinterlands, Canada must invest in strategic airlift as well as in more capable tactical rotary-wing aviation, so that current and future commitments can be deployed, sustained, and re-deployed in a timely fashion.

It will further oblige the leadership of the CF to dispense with the practice of scheduling six-month rotations for contingents heading overseas. The author has been assured by numerous officers returning from Afghanistan that a six-month tour is barely sufficient for a soldier to acclimatize him/herself to the area in which his/she is deployed and to operate effectively.[8] A two-month warm-up period in which the soldier becomes acquainted with the operating environment, followed by a two-month period at which he/she is operating at peak efficiency, followed by another period in which his/her thoughts turn to the terminal phase of the deployment (marked by increasing anticipation for the journey homeward) may no longer be an efficient use of human resources – particularly when the operating environment is so complex and relationships with local actors are difficult to build from scratch. Therefore, longer overseas tours, balanced by longer training and recuperation phases at home, must be considered.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's strategic importance demands robust engagement on many levels. To an extent greater than many other conflicts, it is worthy of Canada's political, diplomatic, financial, and military attention. The defence and security of such a deeply traumatized society, in which a variety of deadly threats lurk, will strain Canada's aversion to risk. But small, safe, and short-term contributions to the defence component of the larger stabilization effort will not suffice.

Short-term stability lies in the CF and ISAF helping to provide rudimentary security in the provinces, and in the incremental reconstitution of central control. Success in one geographical area can be replicated in others, thereby building a network of stable zones extending across the country. Long-term stability will depend less on Canadian defence efforts, and more on the establishment of viable and responsible government, and in socio-economic development.

For Canada to sustain a relevant and robust military presence in Afghanistan – one capable of combat or near-combat operations as well as stabilization – the federal government will need to make good on promises to buttress military human resources, and to deliver on key equipment sets necessary for power projection and sustainment.

Finally, a vigorous debate on the demarcation line between military and aid operations should be encouraged so as to maximize the mutually-reinforcing efforts of those charged with defence and development work. Questions have been raised regarding the propriety of tying aid, which is non-partisan, to tactical success, which seeks to undermine a target group. Canadian experience has shown that a properly trained soldier can be a warrior and a social worker over the course of the same day. However, there is a case to be made that military forces should be employed for tasks for which they alone are suited.

Notes

[1]Barnett Rubin, Road to Ruin: Afghanistan's Booming Opium Industry. Washington: Centre for American Progress, October, 2004, 1.

[2]While Iran has been keen to ensure that the Taliban do not return to power, there are persistent rumours that Pakistan's Inter-services Intelligence (ISI) agency continues to support its former client. See IISS, Strategic Survey 2003/4, Oxford University Press, 244.

[3]Ibid., 246.

[4]Although northern Afghanistan has been served by allied reconstruction teams, the west and south/southeast of the country have not yet benefited from a visible coalition presence. See "Afghanistan: NATO Chief Affirms Expansion of Security Force in West of Country", http://www.defense-aerospace.com, 15 November, 2004

[5]An exception might involve the country's dormant textile industry which, although long moribund, was comparatively vibrant before the Soviet intervention. The extent of the fossil fuel and mineral deposits in the country's northern regions has not yet been explored. Under current circumstances they would only enrich regional leaders who would claim ownership over them.

[6]Canadian troops helping to train the ANA's 4th Battalion were not permitted to accompany the latter in August, 2004 due to lack of approval from Ottawa. US advisors were obliged to stand in, reportedly creating frustration on the part of both US an Afghan authorities. See Stephen Thorne, "Major Embarrassment", Canadian Press, August 12, 2004.

[7]"Military too small for Canada to take rightful place on world stage: general", Canadian Press, 30 May, 2003.

[8]Interview with LGen Rick Hillier, 1 October, 2004.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the CISS or its members.

Copyright 2004
This document may be reproduced in whole or in part.
Kindly credit the CISS.